

re:think

a journal of creative ethnography

issue one: summer 2018

"The Power of the Object and Activity"

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Vol 1, Issue 1, pp 16-18.

The Power of the Object and Activity

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This informal article shows how objects or activities can encourage discussion, sharing and socialisation, and potentially enhance ethnography. Whilst conducting recent ethnographic fieldwork at a Men's Shed, (a community workshop targeted at predominantly older men), I was introduced to their ethos of talking "shoulder to shoulder" rather than face to face. This "shoulder to shoulder" should not be taken too literally, but simply as a term to describe the nature of distracted discussion. Men's Sheds attempt to combat loneliness and social isolation in elderly men by creating practical workshops where members conduct purposeful activities and socialise with others. Men's Sheds originated in Australia but have now become widespread across the UK and other Anglophone countries. My ethnographic research was conducted at a Men's Shed in Scotland, where discussion usually took place in the workshop and men would chat as they worked on their projects. One afternoon, as I sat in the workshop thoughtlessly sanding a crude wooden box, two members were stood speaking across the room:

Gordon: "I'm goin tae the college, goin tae the baths at the college." "Hah, he kens what I'm oan about!" (He points at me, but I had just tuned into their conversation and in truth didn't really know what they were on about).

Jim: "Well, I'll no be spending a fortune oan a widen case, I'll be going tae the crem, they can just put me in a cardboard box or anyhin and whoooof I'm away!"

Gordon: "Aye that's what I'm sayin, the college'll take you fir free. The wife went there."

Jim: "I dinna think the college'd take me, the amount of things I've got wrang wi us..."

Gordon: "Oh aye, they'll still take you! I've goat plenty of that an aw, (such and such disease) got that working on The Cash wi all the asbestos." ['The Cash' is a local office block known for its role in the ATM industry]

Jim: "Aye, I've got it from my years doon the mines."

This conversation shows how the men chat and joke freely in the workshop environment. In this workshop men worked on projects at their own pace, or at the very least, imitated work (as I did). An open and jovial atmosphere was formed where the men could casually mention serious issues without having to fully air them in depth. The example above depicts this. The exchange is ultimately about

nearing death, deteriorating health and funeral arrangements, alluded to in their discussion of wooden coffins and the crematorium. As well as this, Gordon mentions the death of his wife. The 'college' is a reference to the medical college, where presumably they will take cadavers free of charge (regardless of ailments) to aid with medical studies. In another context, this conversation would be considered serious, personal and emotional. Instead, having an object or activity as their main focus, allows them to discretely mention these serious topics, giving them life and air, sharing the bare minimum they are comfortable with, without having to deeply discuss and manage the issues. It is a moment where the men can tentatively share private and personal experiences or issues without being expected to expand on or express them fully. I argue that this is valuable to Shed members who have difficulty talking about problems or concerns and have a general reluctance to share personal emotions and experiences.

I reflected on my own experiences of this atmosphere. Closer to home, I realised a similar situation may have been created. Speaking with an old flatmate one day, reminiscing about the good times he mentioned, "Yeah, I miss when we had that football in the hall." I agreed, but later I began thinking why we both missed the football in the hall. It seemed to me that this football had provided an opening for conversation. We never really did anything with the football, just gently kicked it back and forth down the hall. In doing this though, the object of the football and the focus on the action had opened a space for sharing, where discussion flowed freely and unceremoniously. Alike to the Men's Shed workshop, the football and activity had revealed a space for sharing more personal topics that could be discussed in a casual setting. I should note that nothing dramatic was discussed or shared here. More simply, it just created a space for general socialisation with the potential for mentioning more personal information. The engaging activity created by the football served as a catalyst to discussion as our attention was partially focused on the object and activity at hand.

What the objects and activities in these examples produce is a disruption to, or removal of the staged conversation setting. This is characterised by the change in socialisation that occurs in the newly formed atmosphere or environment. It allows for a different kind of conversation, one which may be more conducive to introducing and opening often difficult topics. Perhaps also, it accommodates a different kind of awareness, attentiveness or listening behaviour that allows for these topics to quickly surface and then recede without need for immediate explanation. The object or activity in these circumstances has a powerful role in mediating conversation and social interaction.

Turning to the method of ethnography, the potential utility of objects and activities can help with gaining information during fieldwork. This is therefore worth keeping in mind when conducting ethnography, and could be deployed to enhance the ethnographic process, enabling researchers to

gather different and valuable field-notes. Opportunities to join informants with their activities are an obvious route into this kind of situation. Alternatively, researchers could set-up discussions in deliberate environments where informants are more likely to experience a detached engagement through occupation with an object or activity. Although ethnography in its nature is an immersive and personal research method, I believe this could be enhanced by tapping into situations like those described above. Whatever form this object or activity may take, there is the possibility of developing close relationships with informants that result in valuable field-notes.